A 12-step PROGRAM

interviewing

THE LINK
Concordia's independent newspaper

GETTING ALL THE ANSWERS YOU NEED

An interview is a controlled conversation. Your job is to make it easy for the interviewee to tell you what you want to know.

1. Don't reveal too much too early

There's no reason to give away all your secrets when you set up the interview. People usually want to know what you want to talk about when you call to arrange an interview, but you don't want to give them too much of a chance to prepare a set of answers. The element of surprise can be your best ally. Don't lie, but it's OK to be vague sometimes. This is definitely the case with school administrators, many of whom fancy themselves media-savvy because they've spoken with many student journalists over the years and know you're new to the craft. Whatever you do, never give away the angle of your story.

2. Ask open-ended questions

An open-ended question will yield an answer beyond yes or no. It's the difference between asking: "Are you the systems quality enhancing supervisor?" and "What does your job entail?" You'll save time and garner better responses.

3. Ask logical questions in a logical order

Imagine the interview as a funnel — you start at the top with fairly broad questions as you establish a rapport with your subject. You ask background questions and do your best to put the person at ease. As you continue, your questions narrow, like the funnel, becoming more focused on seeking specific information.

4. Be smart, not a smarty pants

The goal is to get the information you need, not to wow your subject with your question-asking prowess. Ask simple, direct questions. As a journalist, you have the responsibility to act on behalf of readers, who don't have an opportunity to speak with the interviewee. Step back for a moment and think about the questions you'd want answered if you were a reader.

5. Keep it conversational

Interviews should be conversational. An interviewee is most likely to open up if she/he is comfortable. The more confronta-

tional your style, the less success you will have. Of course, some interviews will be more hostile than others.

6. Let your subject speak

Listen carefully to the responses. While it's important to have prepared a list of questions, it's vital that you follow the thread of the subject's responses. This almost always leads to juicy stuff you never would have known to ask about. Interviewing is more about listening than speaking. Your job is to set the stage for your subject to tell you exactly what you want to know. By actively listening and asking follow-up questions related to what an interviewee has said, you'll uncover gems you didn't even know you were looking for.

7. But move on when you've had enough

It's a skill that takes time to develop, but being able to interrupt a rambling subject and get the interview back on track is essential. Timing is everything. It's a matter of jumping in and re-routing the person's wander. Try asking a follow-up question to something they mentioned, or say "Let's go back to what you said about global warming for a minute..."

8. Try to break down the jargon

There are two main reasons an interviewee will use jargon: 1. If the person is really familiar with their rather obscure material, as often happens in academic settings, or 2. If they're trying to hide something from you by talking in circles. Either way, it's important to get to the root of what the person is saying before you leave the interview, otherwise you may have a mess on your hands when it's time to write up the story. One way to make sure you're on the same wavelength is to pause the interview and repeat what the person has just said, in your own words, and ask "If I'm to understand, what you've said is ..." If you've got it wrong, this will give the interviewee a chance to re-explain. It's also a polite way of reeling in a wayward interviewee.

9. Silence is golden

There's nothing better than asking a tough question and just being quiet and waiting. People hate silence and feel the need to fill dead air. Even if your subject doesn't want to answer the question they'll end up saying something just to cut the tension.

10. The reluctant source

Sometimes people have something they just don't want you to know, and not even the silence method works. The key in these cases is cool-headed persistence. Explain to the subject that it is in their best interests to answer your questions, because you want them to have the opportunity to explain their position. Try to keep things from getting hostile, but if they do, don't get into a fight. The bottom line is you have a job to do, and most reasonable people will understand that. Know when to retreat, when it becomes evident your efforts are futile. Accept that sometimes, you just won't get the answers you need.

11. It ain't over 'til it's over

At the end of the interview, ask if your subject has anything to add. It's a formality, but once in a while you'll get some great information that otherwise would've been lost. Your last question should be to ask if you can call the person back if you have more questions. This leaves the door open if your forgot something or another source raises a new issue. Don't be afraid to call back. A source won't mind clarifying something they've said if it assures greater accuracy in reporting.

12. A word on tape recorders

While it's tempting for a novice interviewer to use a tape recorder, it's really easy to become dependent on one. Fast note-taking is a priceless skill, and generally when the big story breaks and you happen to be in the right place at the right time you won't have a recorder handy. Dead batteries, chewed tapes and hours of transcribing are just three of the disadvantages of being recorder-dependent. This isn't to say they are always bad. They are handy for once in a lifetime interviews and for feature-length stories or profiles, where long quotes may drive the story. While it's true that you won't catch every word when you take notes, you'll gradually develop your own shorthand. By taking some time immediately after an interview to fill in holes in your notes, you're sure to catch almost everything.

It's impossible to cover all you need to know about interviewing in a few hundred words. If you want to know more, the definitive book on journalistic interviewing is Paul McLaughlin's How to Interview. It's a fantastic read and belongs in every journalist's library.

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS WISELY

The Link strives to print progressive material, and it's important to realize that the words you choose for your stories are as important as the subjects you discuss.

The careful choice of words should not be mistaken as political correctness or dismissed as semantics. The words you use make a difference. Just as we aim to raise people's consciousness with the stories we do, we have a responsibility to do the same thing with the language we use as writers and editors. It's easy to think we're doing a good enough job by including stories in the paper that most other papers wouldn't even write. But part of writing progressive material is using language that is inclusive and sensitive.

IT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING

"Twelve of Concordia's handicapped were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus."

and

"Twelve Concordia students with disabilities were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus."

or

"Sparklers is a group for Concordia's elderly."

and

"Sparklers is a group of Concordia students who are seniors."

The idea is to put people first, and not to identify people by their differences. Many journalists de-humanize people they are writing about by writing "the disabled" or "the elderly" instead of "people with disabilities," "older adults" or "seniors."

Think about the connotations of referring to a sexual abuse victim versus a survivor of sexual abuse. Such language serves to further marginalize already marginalized people and reduces the value of the coverage of often-ignored groups. Words should empower instead of victimize people.

The Link is Concordia's independent newspaper. It was founded in 1980 upon the merger of *the Georgian* of Sir George Williams University, and *Loyola News* of Loyola College. We are always looking for writers, editors, photographers, artists, designers and all sorts of creative thinkers to contribute to the paper. If you'd like to get involved, drop by the office or give us a call, and we'll put you to work. Most of Canada's best journalists got their start at student papers. Why not you?

Staff meetings every Friday at 4 p.m. at *the Link* office, room 649 in Concordia's Hall Building. Everyone is welcome.

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